The Ethics of Conceptualization

A Needs-Based Approach

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Abstract

Philosophy strives to give us a firmer hold on our concepts. But what about their hold on us? Why place ourselves under the sway of a concept and grant it the authority to shape our thought and conduct? Another conceptualization would carry different implications. What makes one way of thinking better than another?

This book develops a framework for concept appraisal. Its guiding idea is that questioning the authority of concepts asks for reasons of a special kind: reasons for concept use, which tell us which concepts to adopt, adhere to, or abandon, thereby shoring up—or undercutting—the reasons for action and belief that guide our deliberations.

Traditionally, reasons for concept use have been sought either in timeless rational foundations or in concepts' inherent virtues, such as precision and consistency. Against this, the book advances two main claims: that we find reasons for concept use in the conceptual needs we discover when we critically distance ourselves from a concept by viewing it from the autoethnographic stance; and that sometimes, concepts that conflict, or exhibit other vices such as vagueness or superficiality, are just what we need.

By considering not what concepts are absolutely best, but what concepts we now need, we can reconcile ourselves to the contingency of our concepts, determine the proper place of efforts to tidy up thought, and adjudicate between competing ways of understanding contested notions like *liberty* or *free will*. A needs-based approach separates helpful clarification from hobbling tidy-mindedness, and authoritative definition from conceptual gerrymandering.

Keywords: conceptual ethics, conceptual engineering, thick concepts, authority, critique, contingency, knowledge, theoretical virtues, conflicts of value, pluralism, liberty, free will, responsibility, moral luck, action theory, Bernard Williams, Friedrich Nietzsche, Ronald Dworkin, Iris Murdoch, Susan Wolf.

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